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Written on FEBRUARY 7, 2012 AT 10:27 AM by PROSS

From an Outsider's Perspective: Witnessing the Inaugural Kandahar Role 3 Hospital Training

Filed under UNCATEGORIZED

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Kandahar Role 3 Operational Medical Training Program students practice emergency exit procedures during an egress assistance trainer familiarization class Jan. 18 at the Naval Expeditionary Medicine Institute in Camp Pendleton, Calif. The Kandahar Role 3 Operation Medical Training Program is designed to provide necessary current professional skills training before the nearly 200 service members participating in the course deploy to Kandahar's Role 3 Hospital. (Photo by Mass Communications Specialist 1st Class (SW) Bruce Cummins)

From Jan.12 – 21, I had the opportunity to view, from an outsider's perspective, the inaugural Kandahar Role 3 Hospital Training course at the Naval Expeditionary Medical Training Institute in Camp Pendleton, Calif.

I was sent on temporary orders to document the two-week training program that is designed to bring together the entire staff of a forward-deployed medical facility for the first time in medical pre-deployment training history. I bore witness through the lens of my camera, through the numerous interviews conducted and through the personal relationships developed, to what a group of individuals is capable of in preparing to deploy to one of the most hostile environments on the face of the earth.

From the onset, I simply observed, watching each of these people begin the journey that would ultimately lead them through the world's busiest military trauma facility. Personalities developed, particulars emerged from simply living in close quarters, and I often found myself wondering how these individuals would function together — getting a job done that often seemed hopeless.

Initially, the novelty of the situation birthed a fascination for many involved,

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most of who were on their initial deployment to a combat zone. The reality of the situation seemed a lifetime away, simply images shown on a screen in their living rooms. The reality of it all, however, became transparent when a Navy Trauma Training Center (NTTC) orthopedic surgeon provided a two-hour lecture, describing in detail and aided by a graphic slideshow, the types of injuries the Kandahar Role 3 Hospital Training Course student might expect to see.

I didn't watch the slideshow, concentrating instead on the faces of the individuals in the class, and noticing how very real what they were going to experience had become.

It was at this point, after documenting numerous training scenarios in which individual groups participated, that I began to see the necessity of these personnel working together. The importance of the team aspect this training seemed to foster. But I wondered still how this group of individuals, only a few of whom had met previous to the course, would function in an environment that would demand every ounce of their body, mind, heart and soul.

I watched logistics specialists and gunner's mates learn how to transport an injured person during a patient handling class, affixing a tourniquet to a simulated wound while simulated explosions and instructors screamed at students to hurry. I saw corpsmen and Medical Service Corps officers exit a Humvee and fire weapons at the NEMTI Fire Arms Training System (FATS) small arms simulator. I watched all personnel participate in arduous clinical skill station courses, many of which were instructed by Navy Reserve medical professionals who had served at the very hospital they were training these students to staff.

The NEMTI-sponsored Kandahar Role 3 Training Course culminated with a final exercise, a series of events that I felt would overwhelm the students — a no-win scenario during which any and every eventuality would prove likelihood at the 'hospital' they would be required to staff for the duration of the event.

Each service member participating — the doctors, nurses, Medical Service Corps officers, corpsmen and support personnel — were to be actively engaged in a field hospital environment. With the aid of several outside vendors who provided their time and materials, the flow of 'patients' into the hospital seemed never-ending. Realistic mannequins flooded the triage area, the ward, patient receiving and the operating room. Scenarios involving security breaches, local nationals gaining access to visit personnel treated, and multiple 'attacks' added an element of reality to the exercise, which continued well into the night.

Only when exiting the field hospital and walking away did I remember this was simply an exercise, and while I expected a chaotic mess, what I witnessed was a seamless transition to a multi-faceted unit, one of which I don't doubt will function at the highest level, saving the lives of personnel injured in Afghanistan.

These nearly 200 Navy personnel from various disciplines and backgrounds are no doubt a team, one with a mission that will undoubtedly challenge them on every level imaginable, and I — not a medical professional by trade and somewhat ignorant of the method in which these personnel operate — remained awed at the adaptability, willingness to sacrifice and teamwork this unit epitomized.

There is no doubt they will succeed; the intensity with which they trained was evident. As I look back through the nearly 6,000 photos I took during my visit, I am struck again at the manner in which these sailors and officers have worked together, and under the guidance of the NEMTI staff, developed a reliance on one another, a sense of teamwork that will result in Navy Medicine continuing its mission — providing world-class care ... anytime, anywhere.

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